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HELMET REPEAL EFFORT

Every spring the swallows return to Capistrano, and in Michigan the motorcyclists return to Lansing to lobby legislators to ease helmet laws. Both rites of spring happen without fail, though the numbers of bikers who park their motorcycles around the capitol have fallen off in recent years. However, while their numbers may have been reduced, not so their passion for the issue!

Each session they have at least one legislator who becomes their advocate and introduces a proposal to make the wearing of helmets optional for those over 21 years of age. The proposal has actually passed the House a couple of times, but never made it through the Senate. This year with so many new members in the Senate (many having come recently from the House), the bikers are hopeful that their efforts will finally prevail. However, the last count I saw was 19-19 in the Senate where the Lt. Governor has the deciding vote in the case of such a tie, and it is my understanding that the Governor does not support this, making it unlikely that he would vote in the affirmative. If he does, she always has the option of a veto, and there would not be sufficient votes to overturn a veto.

As one who does not support the legislation, I find these latest numbers a bit unsettling, but I have to credit the motorcyclists for an unfaltering effort in lobbying. They organize letter writing campaigns, FAX messages, visit the Capitol and have even begun running for precinct delegates to have a stronger voice within the party structure. One of the questions on my comprehensive exam for my masters' degree asked us to describe an effective lobbying group. At that time, I cited senior citizens. If I were taking the exam today, I just might cite ABATE and its members. The group exemplifies not only the organization and implementation of good lobbying efforts, it also has had the patience to try and try again, year after year.

It is disturbing, however, that their support is increasing at the same time the fatality rate of motorcycle riders has hit the highest level in more than a decade. The nearly 60% increase in death rates reverses years of decline, and is contrary to the trend in other vehicles where rates continue to decline. Deaths rose from 21 per 100 million estimated vehicle miles traveled for motorcycles in 1997 to 33.4% in 2001, compared with just 1.3 deaths for passenger car occupants. Because no comprehensive study of motorcycles deaths has been done since the 1970's, regulators cannot say precisely what has led to this reversal, but they do cite several potential causes. Only 20 states do not require helmets, down from 47 states in 1975. The median age of riders has also risen from 24 to 38 years; older riders have a harder time recovering from serious injury. Horsepower on the bikes is increasing, and safety training programs have been cut back.

In spite of claims the Abate members attempt to make, studies consistently show that fatality rates are lower when universal helmet laws are in effect; rates range from 20 to 40 percent lower.

Proponents of eliminating the helmet mandate say the matter ultimately comes down to one of freedom of choice, and that they should be allowed that option. Many, in fact, claim they would still wear the helmets. They would probably also argue that they should have the choice of whether

or not to “buckle up,” and yet we know that seatbelts save lives. So do helmets.

With the ever-increasing costs of health care and Michigan’s top-of-the line catastrophic claims program, it is incumbent upon legislators not to make decisions that will result in millions more dollars having to be allocated to care for victims of accidents who suffer closed-head injuries from not wearing helmets.

Michigan residents understand the importance of the helmet law. A recent survey conducted by Marketing Resource Group in February indicated that 75% of Michigan residents support mandatory helmets. You can count me in that 75%.

By Senator Bev Hammerstrom
17th District